

INSTALLATION OF A RETH

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a wish to be buried at once, as his father *reth* Yor had been buried at 766
once after being executed by the Dervishes.

The grave of a *reth*, and of all *hwareth*, is a shaft dug in the ground with a cavity cut in the bottom of one side to form a vault. After the body is placed in the vault, it is shut off with stakes and the shaft filled up with earth.

Some few days before he died the *reth* was baptised a Christian. [717]
It is possible that his conversion affected the ceremonial connected [177]
with his death; the absence of his many wives from the ceremonies,
and his request to be buried at once and not in accordance with tradi-
tional custom suggest this.

The *reth* is looked upon by the Shilluk as responsible for their 643
prosperity, and his strength in their eyes causes the Shilluk, their crops
and their herds, and the fish and hippopotamus in their river to increase.
In times of famine or cattle plague, at once the Shilluk begin to feel
that the *reth* is losing his powers. For two years prior to 1943 the [731]
Shilluk crops had been very poor. In 1942-43 the crops were worse
than ever, and wholesale deaths from famine were only averted by
large scale grain imports by the government. After the previous
famine, which lasted for three years ending in 1935, the *reth* had be-
come seriously ill. This time he was an old man, and knowing his
responsibilities to the Shilluk, and feeling his physical powers failing
owing to his illness, he doubtless lost the will to live, and wanted to
die. Whether he was ceremonially strangled, as is traditional for
reths and all the *hwareth*, we do not know, and cannot find out. We
incline to the view that, as his death became certain, and he and his
family held no further hope of recovery, he was smothered. It would
have been unseemly to have held a post-mortem, and other inform-
ation is not available. It might be put in this way; it is possible
that he was "assisted" to die.

After his initial election the new *reth* was soon busy thinking about 643
the wake for Fafiti Yor. Shilluk opinion seemed to think it would 766
not be held for a year after his death, and that the tribal installation

INSTALLATION OF RETH KUR.

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Thus Nyikang emerged from his shrine in an angry mood. The people fell in procession behind the effigies and, dancing and singing, circled the shrine and then set off for the *gol* Onger where the whips of the *kwa* Nyikwom are stored. Both Nyikang and Dak entered this house, and when they came out again a third effigy, that of Cal,⁶⁴³ was with them. Cal was the brother of Dak and his effigy is made with grey (female) ostrich feathers in contrast to the black feathers of the others. The drum began to beat louder and faster, the singing increased in tempo and all the time the crowds gathered. Simultaneously at the other end of Fashoda, the *reth's* forces were gathering round the mound, the *reth's* police in their scarlet *laus* again conspicuous on the left flank. [541] [778] [237]

There followed a succession of sallies by the assembled forces of Nyikang and the *reth* from opposite ends of the capital. First Nyikang would surge forward and the shield-bearer of the *reth* would conduct the temporary retirement of the *reth's* forces, rattling the bells inside the shield in defiance of Nyikang. Then it would be the turn of the *reth's* followers to advance menacingly and for Nyikang to withdraw in the same manner. Finally a bull was brought forward to be cast on the ground so that the *reth* could step over it before going on to seize *Nyakwer*.⁶⁴³ Once again the casting was mismanaged and with a disdainful wave of his hand, the *reth* motioned to his retainers to drag the bull out of the way, and swept on to wrest *Nyakwer* from the clutches of Nyikang. Millet stalks began to fly and as the *reth's* party returned to the safety of *Athurwic*, an unsuccessful counter-attack was staged by Nyikang. Its failure was obvious and the drummer then beat the retreat of Nyikang and his men towards the shrine. They did not enter it immediately and although Nyikang had never reached the summit of the mound, he and his followers marched round the shrine and appeared to be about to renew the onslaught. Such forces of the *reth* as remained on the ground seemed to melt away into the host of Nyikang, but somehow the new attack never materialised, despite much drumming and singing, marching and counter-marching for a period of some ten minutes, while the *reth's* guard stood watch on the slopes of *Athurwic*. Nyikang, tired of the proceedings, finally withdrew into his shrine, while Dak, Col and his supporters, perhaps disappointed, gathered outside to sing and dance his praises. The battle for *Nyakwer* had ended.

Speech Day

The sequel of events on this occasion followed former precedents. The *reth* came down from *Athurwic* surrounded by the *ororo* and sat down on the covered stool, while a fan made from one wing of a saddle bill stork was held to shade him. He did not, however, step over a sheep as had happened at previous installations. The chiefs of the country, with the exception of those from the east bank who had been discouraged from attending on account of the epidemic of cerebro-spinal meningitis there, sat opposite the *reth* on the ground at about twenty-five yards distance. [643] [237] [293] [631] [731]

⁶⁴³ See Howell and Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 79, Note 21.

Shilluk Government

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According to the tribal mythology, Nyikang was no ordinary mortal. God, it declares, created a great white cow which came up out of the Nile and gave birth to a man child, Dhyang. His grandson Adak married a being who was half woman, half crocodile, and she became the mother of Nyikang. This affinity with the saurian inhabitants of the Nile gave Nyikang a special power over them; they came to his assistance during his great trek whenever his further passage was disputed by superior numbers, and at his command they emerged from the river, assumed human form and fought on his side until the opposition was overcome. [825]

Mysterious was his birth; so too was Nyikang's passing from this earth. Being more than mortal, death, the lot of mortals, was not for him, but during a dance he was enveloped in a whirlwind and carried alive into Heaven. And there he reigns, not God, the great Jwok Atang, but the glorious divine intercessor with God for the Shilluk people. [796] Nyikang is very much alive indeed to the Shilluk, for his spirit enters into every Shilluk king at his installation and dwells in him until his death. [775]

The king, then, is the permanent manifestation of Nyikang to his people. He is their great high priest on earth; their intercessor for them with Nyikang, even as Nyikang is with God. Nay, more than that. It is conceivable that a European state could flourish and prosper under a sickly, or a mad, or a wicked king, or conversely, could weaken and decline, be its ruler a Hercules in strength and a Solon in administration. To the Shilluk, however, such a thing would be quite incomprehensible; to them the bodily and mental strength of the king exercises an influence upon the whole tribe, and upon it depends the well-being and the prosperity of the Shilluk race. Whilst he is strong and in full possession of his faculties the country will be prosperous; should his powers decline, then too will his people weaken and wane. Hence he must not be allowed to become enfeebled physically or mentally, must not be permitted to become senescent. For him there can be no question of abdication, of [731]

643 king, that is, the son of a former king, to attempt to kill the
 682 reigning king and seize the power for himself. The king is,
 669 as it were, considered fair game for anyone who, provided he
 has the requisite credentials, considers himself strong enough
 singlehandedly to take the life and the title of his lord.

Uncasy then, indeed, is the head which wears the Shilluk
 crown, for the owner may wake to feel throttling fingers
 encircling his throat, or heavy folds of cloth muffling his
 face, or, should he have any reason to think that a pretender
 seeks his throne, may spend night after night in unwinking
 vigil, divested of clothes and ornaments which might betray
 his presence or movements, carrying a blackened spear,
 prowling ceaselessly around his own village, pausing where
 the shadows are darkest, magnifying each noise of the night
 and interpreting it as the stealthy approach of a marauder
 intent upon his life. I must confess that I have never heard
 of an attempt being made upon the life of the king by a
 would-be usurper in recent years, but it would appear that
 the possibility is always present, and it seems that an attempt
 to assassinate King Papiti was made about 1930 by a son
 of the deposed king, Kur. During the past ten years three
 Shilluk kings have died, and although there is no certainty
 that any one of them was violently 'assisted' to die, there is
 equally no certainty that he was not.

643 Once the king is dead, either from natural causes or
 731 otherwise, a great disquietude and uneasiness settles on the
 [715] country. Officially 'the land has ceased to be'; the spirit of
 Nyikang has lost its dwelling place and the country and the
 people have temporarily lost their protector. All manner of
 evils may fall on them; famine, pestilence, invasion, and—
 what comes nearer home and is always a potential danger
 during the interregnum—civil war may break out should
 any one of the nyireth who has a sufficiently strong following
 make a bid to seize the throne for himself. Hence, after the
 death of a king, the election of his successor is proceeded
 with as quickly as possible, but it is only with his inaugura-
 tion, about a year afterwards, that the shadow of disaster is
 lifted and the land may be said to live again.

Justice

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occasional outbreaks of fighting. An incident which might have had serious consequences occurred in 1940, shortly after I had arrived at Detwok. The young bloods of Detwok, after a merry evening of drinking and dancing, thought to round off a perfect day with a raid on the ladies of Pabiu. All good fun and high spirits, but the men of Pabiu, not unnaturally, objected to their daughters and sisters being taken for a midnight stroll, and the father of one girl stabbed her aggressor in the throat. The attackers, suddenly sobered by this serious end to their pranks, retreated to their own village, carrying their wounded companion. The drum was sounded, the village roused and the men armed themselves for the raid that Pabiu might make on them for the insult offered to its womenfolk, or for the attack that they would most surely launch on Pabiu should the wounded man die. Fortunately tragedy was averted by the good sense of the chief of Detwok. Knowing that he would be unable to restrain his angry subordinates if the man did die, he sent a runner to the mission for medical assistance and another to Kodok for the police. Mother R. immediately went to Detwok and by prompt first aid saved the wounded warrior's life and the two villages a great amount of extra trouble and grief. The arrival of the police in the morning and the removal of the originators of the mischief restored peace, at least temporarily, to the neighbourhood.

Later the same year, the Assistant District Commissioner chanced to drop in at Detwok. His visit was most unfortunate from the village's point of view, for he found a couple of Sudanese witch doctors plying a brisk trade with, not merely the connivance, but the positive approval of the chief. He and the medicine men were promptly arrested and he was deposed from his chieftainship. He had been not merely chief of Detwok but the District chief, and now, to the chagrin of all true Detwokians, that coveted honour was transferred to Pabiu.

The year 1943 gave Detwok fresh cause for resentment and a fresh longing for revenge over their hated rivals. The rains had failed and the mid-year food shortage was even

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578 more severe than usual. The government set up a grain
628 distribution centre at Pabiu, since it was the chief village
• [737] of the district. Pabiu waxed fat and rejoiced; Detwok
[648] snarled in anger and groaned with hunger and metaphorically
tightened its belt and longed for the day when it would
triumph over its arrogant rival.

Two years later, in September 1945, things boiled up
again, and I thought that bloodshed on a large scale was
unavoidable. A dance was being held at Pabiu and, since
for a long time peace had reigned between the two villages,
the people from Detwok attended. I usually permitted the
[535] schoolboys to go to these harmless afternoon dances, and
was horrified when they came streaming back an hour before
the usual time, crying that fighting had broken out and that
men had been killed. There were boys from both Detwok
and Pabiu attending the school and these, fearing that the
mission would be raided during the night by one side or the
other, refused to stay there and fled to the sanctuary of their
homes and the protection of the spears of their fathers and
brothers. Fortunately, things were not as bad as they
appeared at first. People from all the surrounding villages
[535] attend these frequent dances, and among those enjoying
themselves on this happy afternoon were the people from
Alel, a large village three miles south of Detwok. During
the dance a man from Detwok came face to face with one
from Alel who, it seemed, had in company with his friends
waylaid the Detwokian some time previously and beaten
him up. Excited by the dancing, the Detwok warrior,
suddenly confronted by his enemy, could not restrain him-
self. His spear flashed and the other man fell wounded.
Immediately there was uproar. Alel was by way of being
allied to Pabiu, and the two villages promptly joined forces
against Detwok. A scrimmage ensued during which blows
were struck and a few spear wounds were inflicted, but only
one man—from Detwok—was seriously wounded. In the
face of superior numbers Detwok had to withdraw, followed
by the taunts of the victors, but swearing revenge. Two days
of tension followed during which the Sisters were kept busy

CHAPTER VIII

RELIGION

IT is so easy to suppose, when speaking of the peoples who ⁷⁷⁶ live in the continent of Africa as pagan, that they are without any religion at all and have no knowledge or recognition of God. Yet it is absolutely untrue of them all. Certainly among the Shilluk people there is not one, no matter how remote from Christian influence, who would not willingly subscribe to the first article of the Creed: 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.' He does indeed believe in God, the Supreme Omnipotent Spirit, Creator of all things, Lord of life and death, the great Jwok-Atang. I once commenced instructing a dying Shilluk chief by asking him 'Do you believe in God?' He looked at me in wonder that I should ask so foolish a question, and replied 'Of course I do. All men believe in God.' And undoubtedly, to the Shilluk, God is very real. On entering a village, you are greeted in His name, 'Yi kall ⁵⁷⁶ yi Jwok,' i.e. 'God has brought you.' As you leave you are sped on your way with a prayer, 'Yi mith yi Jwok.' 'May God guard you.' A person looking very seedy and sorry for himself will come and tell you that 'he has God', by which you immediately understand not that he has experienced a ⁷⁵³ sudden religious conversion, but that he is sick. So too, good fortune and misfortune both are attributed to God, and of the latter, even the most crushing ones, the failure of the crops, the decimation of the cattle through plague, the ⁷³¹ death of a loved one through sickness or accident, although grieved over, are accepted resignedly as coming from God.

Yet here there is a great paradox, for although God is acknowledged by the Shilluk as the Lord of all things, and His name is so frequently invoked, yet He is not worshipped by the people and to Him no prayer or sacrifice is offered. ⁷⁸²

776 God is considered as being far off, aloof from mankind, caring nothing for the things He has created. Men do not then approach Him directly, nor, at least on great public occasions, presume to offer sacrifice to Him. Approach to God can only be made through the great mediator, Nyikang. It is Nyikang who, though he led his people into and left them in so sorry a plight, is revered as the Father and Saviour of the Shilluk people, is worshipped as a demi-god, and is thought of as always dwelling among them in the person of the reigning king. To him are all prayers made and sacrifices offered; in his honour sacred dances are performed. His numerous shrines, located in different parts of the country in which his spirit is believed to dwell, are carefully tended by the Bang Reth, to whom fall the perquisites of the meat of the sacrifices and the tributes of grain willingly surrendered from a meagre harvest in the sacred name of Nyikang.

776 The king, as the personification, as it were, of Nyikang
643 on earth, will offer the principal sacrifices on important
782 occasions during the year, for example, to obtain a plentiful
789 rainfall and a bumper harvest, for the averting of the plague
731 of weaver birds which descend on the country in their
millions each year and devour the ripening grain, in times
of drought and flood, of epidemic among the people and
plague which is carrying off the cattle. On these and similar
occasions is Nyikang invoked and sacrifice offered to him by
634 the king himself and the district chiefs, and yet it is clearly
understood by all that it is not Nyikang himself who will
bestow the benefit or avert the disaster, but God, moved to
clemency by the intercession of Nyikang for his people. And
so the second and last article of the Shilluk Creed would run
'and in Nyikang, Son of God, Father of the Shilluk people,
and our only intercessor with God for us'.

775 Alongside the cult of Nyikang, there is also a cult of the
769 dead. The Shilluk have only a vague notion of life after
death in the Christian sense. They do, indeed, speak of the
Pa Jwok, God's country, which is the abode of Nyikang and
their ancestors, and which is reached only after months of

778 king, Kudit, and during her father's reign assisted him by
 776 her very able administration of the northern province of the kingdom. She continued in this office until her death which took place during the reign of Kudit's successor, Aney. To this shrine in times of severe drought, or on the occasion of some other such public misfortune, comes the whole populace of the district to dance and sing and pray before it, to offer its tithes of grain, and to slay and sacrifice a bull to the spirit of Nyala.

793. The Shilluk do not possess a priesthood in the sense of a
 782 body of men dedicated to offer sacrifice; sacrifice may be offered publicly by the king or the chief of a district, or privately by any individual. There are, however, individuals who claim to have supernatural powers, to be possessed by
 756 Nyikang and to be the interpreters of his wishes, to foretell
 754 the future, to read auguries, to heal the sick, to avert or to cause evil. These people are of two kinds, the *Ajwogo*—literally, the 'man of God'—and the *Jal yath*, the 'medicine man'. The *ajwogo* deals in white magic, that is, his works
 756 are, or are supposed to be, beneficial to the community or
 755 the individual on behalf of whom his services are solicited. For a fee of a sheep or a goat or a cow, according to his rapacity and the circumstances of his client, he will do his best to cure or to kill a sick person that he has been called in to attend. For he will cheerfully administer a potion concocted of ingredients the potentialities of which, either for good or ill, he hasn't the slightest idea; will indulge in blood-letting to an extent that would make an eighteenth-century leech blench with horror; and is not above performing a surgical operation, despite his complete ignorance of anatomy and surgery, with a rusty piece of iron, or a spear head or some other such Shilluk equivalent of the scalpel and lancet. At Detwok a lovely, high-spirited cheerful girl was reduced to a physical wreck after her ordeal at the hands of one of these wretches. She became ill and was attended by the Sisters who thought that she should go to hospital. Her pagan parents refused to allow this and instead called

How the Faith came to the Shilluk

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Comboni thereupon began two Congregations, the Verona Fathers and the Missionary Sisters of Verona. In May 1871 he was made Pro-Vicar of Central Africa, and on January 26th, 1873, left Cairo for Khartoum to take up residence there. He had been preceded by some of his missionaries, and immediately opened stations at Dilling, El Obeid and Berber. In 1877 he was consecrated Bishop and made Vicar Apostolic of Central Africa, but returning to Khartoum from Rome he found the Sudan desolated by a terrible famine which caused the death of hundreds of thousands of natives and many priests. He was thus forced to abandon his cherished project of the expansion of the mission. Dr. Matteuci, the famous explorer, wrote concerning this:

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Mgr. Comboni sees in the sad loss of nearly all his missionaries the delaying, for who knows how long, of the realization of his vast projects. In the last few months he had begun an agricultural station on the Blue Nile at Gadaref destined to have a great future; he had made arrangements for the establishment of a station at Fashoda, the capital of the Shilluk country, one of the most barbarous and unhealthy places in Central Africa, and was then preparing an expedition to the Equatorial Lakes which would have gone down in history as one of the most important achievements of Daniel Comboni.

Comboni always had in mind the poor Shilluk whom he had encountered on his journey to Holy Cross, and it was to help them that he planned to open a mission at Fashoda, but the famine postponed indefinitely this design, and the trials of the mission reached a climax with the death of the great apostle himself in 1881. It seemed that shipwreck was near, but the mission weathered the storm, only to come to grief a few months later. In 1881 the Mahdist revolt broke out, and as Dilling, El Obeid and Berber fell to the Mahdi, the priests, brothers and nuns became their prisoners. Many of them died as the result of the treatment they received when they refused to deny their faith and become Moslems;

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763 confession was an easy task now, and I gave her Holy
 * 797 Viaticum and then proceeded to anoint her. As I did so
 she stirred feebly, tried to raise herself up and twisted her
 shoulder towards me. 'Father,' she said 'put some there.
 That's where the pain is.'

* 797 Epidemics sometimes visit the district and then the
 731 missionary is very busy indeed. Devastating though they
 164 may be, carrying off both young and old, the strong as well
 as the weak, they can have a chastening effect on the lazy,
 indifferent and careless. On one occasion I stood in the dark
 behind a hut, whilst mosquitoes in their thousands whined
 and buzzed and bit, hearing a panic-stricken man's con-
 fession. Within the hut, his wife, his little daughter and
 infant son, all newly baptized, lay dying. The sickness had
 not touched him, but its visitation to his home did what
 years of coaxing, prodding and reminding had failed to do.

164 A primitive people like the Shilluk fall an easy prey to
 744 whatever sickness is going. Not overclean in their persons
 and insanitary in their habits, they huddle together at night
 in small windowless huts with the doorway blocked by a
 heavy grass mat; hence disease quickly spreads from person
 to person, from hut to hut and from village to village. Medical
 facilities are limited and an epidemic can get a good hold
 before effective reinforcements can be sent from Malakal,
 sixty miles away, to help the overworked Medical Assistant.
 During my first years at Detwok, cerebro-spinal meningitis
 was a regular annual visitor. It came when the rains ceased,
 and with the first showers of the next rainy season it dis-
 appeared again, but during the intervening months it did
 its deadly work and scarcely a day passed without some
 village mourning its dead. An effective remedy was found,
 however, in a spinal injection of the famous 'M & B' drug,
 and the scourge lost much of its terror. After 1942 it failed
 to put in its annual appearance, and to date Detwok and
 district has been free of it altogether, although yearly it
 makes its presence felt in the southern end of the province,
 and takes a deadly toll in other provinces in the Sudan.

CHAPTER XIV

FAMINE AND FLOOD

IT would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the majority of the Shilluk live in a state of chronic hunger. The poverty of the land they till, their primitive methods of husbandry, the elements which seem to fight against them in their annual struggle to raise a crop all contribute to make this so. And if despite all these handicaps, if perhaps in an occasional year the fates relent a little and send neither deluge nor drought, but a supply of rain liberal enough to nurture a plentiful field, then the weaver birds will descend in their millions to lay waste the great heads of mature but as yet unripened grain. The damage that these tiny predators can do is incredible. In the early dawn they swoop like a black cloud on the unprotected fields, settle and after a short time, rise again. But they leave behind them ruin; the heads of grain are in rags and tatters and the ground is carpeted green with the unripened grain. In three or four days the former flourishing field is laid waste.

Once, at daybreak, I saw a migration of weaver birds. They were flying up the Nile from north to south. I did not see the beginning of this great army, neither did I see the end, but for half an hour it flew in an unbroken mass which seemed to stretch across the entire breadth of the river and to be about a foot deep. Its passing boded ill for the luckless cultivators in the south.

Despite these misfortunes the Shilluk usually manage to garner something from their impoverished fields. From October and for the next few months they generally have sufficient to eat and after that, if they have money to buy it, grain imported from more prosperous parts of the country is available in the merchants' stores. But occasionally the whole country is stricken. The failure of the rains is

- 731 widespread, few have a sufficiency and fewer have any to spare for sale. Then the plight of the Shilluk is pitiful indeed.

Such a disaster occurred in 1945. The rains were sparse all over the country and failed almost entirely in the Upper Nile Province. In the Detwok area, after a promising start a prolonged drought set in and the young shoots withered and died. Hope revived when a heavy downpour of rain broke the drought and the people went out to plant again. But this second planting suffered the same fate as the first and as one scorching day followed another during the remainder of what was supposed to be the rainy season expectation slowly died, together with the wilting crops. The ruin was complete and, as we soon learned, was confined not merely to our own area or even to the Upper Nile but was general throughout the country.

- 797 In Detwok we were planning to open a Central School the
731 following year and consequently had in hand a larger
461 building programme than usual. The famine assured us of no scarcity of labour. Usually even though the crops are meagre there is no shortage in the months immediately following the harvest, and the Shilluk, careless for the future, gives himself over to the enjoyment of the fruits of his industry. Much of his precious grain is converted into beer
[574] and he dispenses and receives lavish hospitality at the many
[595] village dances with which the Shilluk celebrates the harvest. Not unnaturally the proposal that he should spend the next few months digging foundations or brickmaking or carrying water is received with a marked lack of enthusiasm, and we usually depend for our labour upon those improvident bachelors who have not bothered about a cultivation and who moreover are faced with the necessity of raising money to pay the annual poll tax.

- 731 This year, however, there was no need to be anxious about
797 a shortage of workmen. Each Monday when the labourers
466 were hired for the week the mission was besieged from before dawn by hundreds of men and women begging for a chance to be able to earn a few shillings. We were able to employ only a fraction of this crowd, and it was a thankless and an

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unhappy task to try to choose fairly so that, if not every individual, at least every village should be given a turn. It was an even more difficult and unhappy task to send the disappointed ones away; to turn a deaf ear to their pleadings; to close one's eyes to the mute appeal in theirs. 731
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But in actual fact the ones who worked were little better off than those who didn't, for although they had a little money there was no grain to buy. In view of the opening of the new school we had been forming a reserve of grain, but the scheme had to be abandoned in the face of such complete shortage. We doled out what we had and by dint of careful and stringent rationing we were able to keep about twenty families, I will not say 'fed', but at least from starvation from October until February when our store was exhausted and we could do no more.

The Government stepped in and took control of all the grain in the country in order to ensure a fair distribution. We had at that time about 120 people—schoolchildren and permanent employees—to feed every day, and normally used a 2-cwt sack of grain per day. We were allotted ten sacks per month, one third of our usual consumption, and so had to make a proportionate reduction in the food bowl. But there was no question of the Shilluk schoolboy being thankful for small mercies in receiving a little every day whilst his less fortunate parents and brothers and sisters at home got nothing. There were protest meetings among the boys generally followed by an indignant procession carrying the meagrely filled bowls so that the Father—myself—who in their eyes was responsible for this shortage could see for himself the result of his gross neglect in not cornering the entire grain supply for their benefit. In vain I pointed out that the famine was no fault of mine and that they were better off than their brethren in the village. They replied in effect that such arguments were beside the point. Since they had done me the favour of coming to the mission to be fed, clothed, housed—and incidentally taught—for nothing, the least I could do in return was to see that the feeding was adequate, and since I had so obviously failed in this respect,

- 73/ they might as well go home again. And go home many of
797 them did, regardless of the fact that whilst at the mission they would get some sort of a daily ration, there would be nothing for them at the parental board, not even a welcome.

Those who remained got a little extra in consequence of the defection of their fellows, and in order to supplement their slim diet still more I divided the school into two and on alternate days sent one half to fish for the benefit of everybody whilst the other half had class, and bought a bull each week to provide them with a couple of meat meals.

And so we struggled on from month to month until in June the importation of beans from Egypt eased matters considerably, and eventually with the arrival of the new crops in mid-September the crisis was passed.

- 73/ The unfortunate people outside the mission did not fare so well. True, periodic allotments of grain were made at various central villages that boasted a shop or two, but it was impossible to devise an equitable system of rationing, and since many people were several miles from these centres, the possession of money did not guarantee that there would be grain left by the time they had tramped the hot and dusty road to the shop. For the most part they subsisted on roots and grass and occasionally a decent catch of fish would enable them to forget their misery for a time.

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We heard of many instances of suffering and endurance during these dreadful months; how a young mother alone in a hut with her newly-born baby, in trying to lift herself up to reach for a drink of water fell on the infant and killed it; how a woman in search of food walked from Detwok through the Shilluk country to Kaka some fifty miles to the north, there crossed the river and continued her quest among the equally stricken Dinka tribe, and making a huge semi-circle through rough country, eventually recrossed the Nile opposite Detwok and came home empty-handed, having covered about 150 miles on foot.

- 73/ One morning when I was going across to the school I saw
797 two little children in the Sisters' compound trying to pick out the few grains of millet seed that had fallen into the

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cracks in the soil. As I approached they fled and I continued with a heavy heart across the compound. The Reverend Mother came from the house to meet me. The tears were streaming down her face as she told me that the two children had been abandoned by their parents who had gone away in search of food. Near to tears myself I told the weeping nun that I could not and would not take any more children into the school, that I could not and would not feed all the destitute children from the villages and that I could not permit her to give of our scanty ration to any of the hungry folk that daily haunted the mission. But, I hastily added, as the tears flowed faster, if she was a wicked and disobedient nun and chose when I was safely out of the way to disregard these strict orders and give a little food occasionally to two small hungry children, then of course I could not prevent her from doing so. It took her a moment to grasp my meaning, and then brightening, she dried her eyes and cheerfully promised to disobey me each morning when I was in the classroom and unable to see what was going on. And so the two children were given a meal every day while the shortage lasted and until their parents returned to provide for them.

The rains of 1946 bade fair to make amends for their sad failure of the previous year. And that the heavy downpours we experienced in Detwok were no mere local affairs was soon made evident from the rapidity with which the Nile rose. The mission is half a mile from the river and is reached by a road built some four feet above the swamp level and lined with trees by our energetic Italian predecessors. By the end of September the swamp waters had overtopped the road and had flooded it in parts to a depth of nearly a foot, and by Christmas the accepted method of going to collect mails and stores from the fortnightly steamer was to paddle the mission boat down the road until it grounded in the mud and then to wade the rest—and this generally at about 2 a.m.

During this time Mgr. Wall, the Prefect, paid one of his periodic visits to the mission. He did not travel on the ordinary fortnightly boat but by a casual northbound tug,

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797 so that his arrival was unawaited. As usual the boat arrived at Detwok in the small hours of the morning, and after manœuvring round in the inky darkness managed to put Monsignor ashore on what was thought to be the road, but which turned out to be the garden. Since this was locked he could not get out, so the tugmaster obligingly took him on board again and then backing his craft a few yards down to where the path was, told a couple of sailors to carry Monsignor ashore and escort him up to the mission. They managed to land him without mishap on the only piece of dry land that remained—a patch about the size of a tablecloth—but after splashing a few yards through the watery waste the boatmen prudently refused to proceed further and lifted Monsignor up to carry him back to the tug. Unfortunately they dropped him in the river. However, he was quickly fished out, and spent the rest of the night in a chair, in pyjamas and dressing-gown, while his sodden garments dried out in the engine-room.

On another occasion the unfortunate Father whose duty it was to attend to whatever boats should call at the mission was aroused from his slumbers by a mournful hoot from the river which heralded the arrival of a steamer. Reluctantly dragging himself from his snug bed he went out on the verandah and to his relief saw the lights of the boat receding in the distance. He decided that either the hooter had blown in mistake or else whatever had been dumped on the bank could wait until morning. 'Whatever had been dumped on the bank' did wait until morning; it was Mgr. Wall once more, making another unexpected visit to the mission. Finding no guide coming to assist him and not daring in the dark to attempt the perilous passage of the waters alone, he was marooned and had perforce to await the coming of daylight, sitting on his suitcase and wrapped in his dressing-gown for protection against the hordes of mosquitoes that delightedly hastened to the place to keep him company during the long hours of his vigil.

When at length the river began to subside the floods receded rapidly, so rapidly indeed that they carried away a

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great portion of the road and of the embankment that we had repaired and built up at no inconsiderable cost and labour only the previous year. 731 ●
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So passed our trial by famine and flood. We have been visited by both misfortunes since then but not again in successive years nor on so large and widespread a scale.